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# Physical Education and Special Educational Needs in North-West England

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The paper examines the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream secondary schools from the perspective of physical education (PE) teachers. The findings of this case study, which used individual interviews and was undertaken in the North-West of England, suggest that team games are activities which teachers find particularly difficult to plan and deliver in an inclusive way. Specifically, many teachers suggested that there was limited opportunity for individual planning during team games and that they found it difficult to develop and implement rules and adapt games to make them more inclusive. Moreover, there was an expressed feeling among teachers that, first, their initial teacher training (ITT) had not prepared them adequately for their day-to-day endeavours to include pupils with SEN in PE; and, second, that the schools in which they work are not providing them with any inclusion training. Finally, there was a general feeling among PE teachers that they are not receiving enough support from special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and learning support assistants (LSAs) whose role is, lest we forget, to enable teachers to include pupils with SEN in the mainstream education system.

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*Keywords:* physical education, pupils with special educational needs, integration, inclusion.

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## Introduction

Although often viewed as a contemporary development, the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools is a long-term process, which has roots that can be traced back to the mid-1800s (Thomas and Smith, 2009). Nevertheless, the inclusion process has gained much more political and academic attention over the last sixty years or so, most notably since the passage of the 1944 Education Act (DoE, 1944), which provided a special needs education system with different types of schools for pupils in each of the eleven so-called

'handicaps' (Halliday, 1993). One criticism of the segregated system was that it did not consider and, thus, cater for the pupils' individual needs or competencies. Indeed, there were few attempts at the time to investigate whether the support given to disabled pupils was adequate, effective, or in fact what they really wanted or needed (Barnes et al., 1999).

From around the 1960s, there was growing support in society for young disabled people to be educated alongside their age-peers in mainstream schools because of a matter-of-fact assumption, which argued that the inclusion of these young people into mainstream education would help facilitate their access to, and participation in, social life more generally. The Education Act of 1981, which was influenced by the 'equalisation of opportunities' rhetoric that had swept European societies since the 1960s as part of the human rights movement, further consolidated this ideological purview by explicitly stating that young disabled people should be given the opportunity to be educated in mainstream schools as a way of ameliorating barriers between disabled and non-disabled people in society (DES, 1981). One consequence of these policy developments was that there began a transfer of pupils from special to mainstream schools over the coming years. It was largely those pupils who were deemed to have 'less severe' difficulties (for example, physical disabilities) who joined the mainstream education system, whilst many of those pupils with 'more severe' difficulties (for example, multiple disabilities) tended to remain in the special school sector (Halliday, 1993).

Largely based on the recommendations of the Warnock Report (DES, 1978), the medically defined categories through which the individual pupil was perceived as having the 'problem' were replaced with the concept of SEN and the process of 'statementing' – a formal process of identifying, assessing and supporting a pupil with SEN – in the 1981 Education Act. It is important to note that the previous categories of handicap applied to only 2 per cent of the school population, many of whom were already educated in special schools, whilst this new concept of SEN led to the identification of as many as 20 per cent of pupils expected to have special needs (DES, 1978). To clarify, SEN refers to those pupils who have a learning difficulty requiring special educational provision to be made for them (Audit Commission, 2002); that is, provision additional to that afforded their age-peers. Pupils with SEN have learning needs arising from a wide range of difficulties, including physical, cognitive, sensory, communicative or behavioural (Audit Commission, 2002). It is noteworthy that SEN is a contextual concept insofar as an individual may have a SEN in PE but would not necessarily have a SEN in a classroom based subject. For example, an individual who requires a wheelchair for mobility would not necessarily have a SEN in an English lesson but may require additional provision in a PE context.

During the mid-1990s the commitment towards inclusive education and the debate surrounding its feasibility was further intensified by a number of significant developments in government policy, the most noteworthy being the introduction of the Salamanca Statement in 1994. The Statement proposed that all national governments enrol all children into mainstream education wherever possible in order to provide ‘the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all’ (UNESCO, 1994: ix). The British Government, in turn, made more unequivocal its ostensible commitment to cultivating a culture of inclusive education by adopting the Statement as a means of aligning itself to the European Union’s human rights agenda (Maher, 2010). The British Government introduced the first National Curriculum for PE (NCPE) in 1992, which aimed to establish a broad and balanced curriculum as a statutory entitlement for pupils in all state schools in England and Wales. The concept of ‘equal opportunities’ underpinned this policy, which means that ‘all children should be allowed access to, and given confidence in, the different activities involved [in the programme of study], regardless of their ... SEN or disability’ (DES/WO, 1991:15). It must be noted, however, that equal access cannot be assumed to provide equal opportunities insofar as affording a pupil access to the same curriculum as their age-peers does not mean that the curriculum to which they have access will be inclusive. Nevertheless, equal opportunities rhetoric also pervaded, to varying degrees, revision of the NCPE in 1995, 2000 and 2008.

It is against this backdrop that the small-scale study aims to examine PE teachers’ views and experiences of including pupils with SEN in mainstream PE. Before endeavouring to do so, however, the paper reviews the literature *vis-a-vis* the inclusion of pupil with SEN in mainstream PE, starting with a brief examination of the opaque concepts of integration and inclusion.

## Literature Review

**Integration and Inclusion.** ‘Integration’ is viewed, in academic theory at least, as a process whereby pupils with SEN are expected to succumb to the dominant culture by assimilating into the structure of the NCPE and the established arrangements of PE lessons that are intended for those pupils without SEN (Fredrickson and Cline, 2002). In short, integration entails educating pupils with SEN together with pupils without SEN in an unchanged mainstream school. On the other hand, there is little consensus regarding the process of ‘inclusion’, particularly between education professionals, academics and policy-makers, perhaps because of the many diverse and contrasting conceptualisations (Smith and Thomas, 2005). The academic purview of inclusion is often situated

on a continuum ranging from planning PE lessons that suit the abilities and needs of all pupils (Barton, 1993), to radically restructuring the culture of the school through its policies, learning, teaching and assessment so that pupils with SEN can be fully included (Corbett and Slee, 2000). In national and international policy terms, inclusion is said to involve the development of policies that seek to 'bring about a genuine equalization of opportunity' (UNESCO, 1994: 11) for all pupils.

The findings of several studies undertaken in Britain, however, suggest that despite the rhetorical commitment by many teachers to the concept of inclusion, whatever that may be, in practice there appears to be a disparity between the experiences shared by pupils with and without SEN. Some pupils with SEN spend less time in PE lessons and often participate in a narrower PE curriculum when compared to their cohort (Atkinson and Black, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2005; Fitzgerald et al., 2003a, 2003b; Goodwin and Watkinson, 2000; Morley et al., 2005; Smith, 2004; Smith and Green, 2004; Sport England, 2001). In attempting to explain these unequal experiences, Smith (2004: 45) suggests that many of the PE teachers that he interviewed claimed to provide 'as much opportunity as possible' in order to meet their legal obligation to include pupils with SEN. Such a commitment to the concept of equal opportunities is perhaps unsurprising given that equal opportunities rhetoric has been a prevalent feature of educational policies generally, and successive NCPE revisions in particular.

When scrutinised, however, it appears that the way many of the teachers interviewed by Morley et al. (2005) and Smith (2004) conceptualised inclusion, and what they reported doing in practice, was in fact indicative of the process of integration. That is, the everyday practices of many PE teachers seemed to bear a resemblance to a process whereby it was the obligation of the pupils with SEN to integrate into the lesson, which the PE teacher had planned for the ostensibly more able pupils. With the aim of shedding more light on the 'integration' process, both Morley et al. (2005) and Smith (2004) asked the teachers to conceptualise integration and inclusion; all found it difficult to differentiate between the two terms. One potential unforeseen consequence of such conceptual ambiguity is that it could lead to 'potential confusion in the interpretations of values and principles relating to inclusive education' (Vickerman, 2002: 79). PE teachers need to appreciate the conceptual differences between integration and inclusion if they are to plan and deliver a curriculum that facilitates, rather than impedes, the government objective of providing meaningful experiences of PE for pupils with SEN. Concomitant with an opaque conceptualisation of inclusion, much of the available research has pointed towards the unintended consequences of the NCPE because of its inappropriate structure and content.

**National Curriculum Physical Education.** Since its inception in 1992, one salient feature of the NCPE has been its prioritisation of competitive sport and team games (Maher, 2010; Penney and Evans, 1999). Several studies have suggested that one consequence of the ostensible emphasis placed on performance, achievement and skill development in competitive sport and team games has been that many pupils with SEN are being excluded, by degrees, from the same opportunities and experiences provided for their age-peers in curricular PE (Maher, 2010; Morley et al., 2005; Smith, 2004; Smith and Green, 2004; Sport England, 2001). Notwithstanding obvious concerns regarding the disparity between the opportunities available for pupils with and without SEN in mainstream PE, it is perhaps more important to note that young disabled people in special schools were more likely to participate in PE than those attending mainstream schools, both at 'least once' (93 per cent and 89 per cent, respectively) and on more than 10 occasions (69 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively) (Sport England, 2001). Hence, despite persistent calls for pupils with SEN to be educated in mainstream schools in order to challenge dominant ideologies and traditions, it seems that one unintended consequence of the inclusion process has been that the opportunities for pupils with SEN – in PE, at least – have diminished when compared to their age-peers in special schools.

Research conducted by Fitzgerald (2005) and Smith (2004) suggests that it was not unusual for some pupils with SEN to be removed from a PE lesson – particularly if it was team game or competitive sport based – and, perhaps more importantly, their cohort, to do other activities if the pupil was unable to integrate themselves into what had been planned. Similarly, some of the pupils with SEN interviewed by Fitzgerald et al. (2003a) highlighted a tendency for them to be involved to a much lesser degree when the activities being taught were team games. When pupils with SEN do participate in the same activities as their age-peers, some are often excluded, to varying degrees, from fully participating in the activity by the actions of their ostensibly more able peers. For example, in a study conducted by Fitzgerald (2005) some of the pupils with SEN suggested that there was often a process of peer-led exclusion whereby they were bypassed in certain activities, particularly in team games (during a passing move, for example) because of their ostensibly inferior physical capabilities.

For some pupils with SEN their limited experiences of the breadth of activities offered their age-peers, in tandem with negative perceptions that both they and their age-peers have about their bodies and capabilities, is said to have a pernicious effect on their confidence and self-esteem in PE (Fitzgerald et al., 2003a, 2003b; Goodwin and Watkinson, 2000). Many of the pupils in research conducted by Goodwin and Watkinson (2000) reported feeling embarrassed by their disability, which developed from the behaviour of their age-peers. In a

study undertaken by Fitzgerald (2005), moreover, some of the pupils with SEN suggested that they regularly experienced varying degrees of social isolation in PE when they participated in separate activities, which often had a detrimental effect on their social interaction with pupils without SEN. So, for some pupils, it appears that mainstream PE lessons, particularly those that are competitive sport and team game based, are doing more to normalise segregation and reinforce, rather than ameliorate, discriminatory attitudes.

It is worth noting that those more individualised activities that are often at the periphery of PE culture, most notably, swimming, dance, gymnastics, tennis and badminton (Penney, 2002; Waddington, et al., 1998) have been identified as particularly appropriate for facilitating the full inclusion of pupils with SEN in PE (Blinde and McCallister, 1998; DES/WO, 1991; Goodwin and Watkinson, 2000; Meek, 1991; Morley et al., 2005; Smith, 2004). That is to say, it has been argued that more individualised activities are generally more inclusive by design and, thus perhaps less likely to necessitate significant adaptation in order for pupils with SEN to be included (Meek, 1991). To summarise, research suggests that the further we move away from individualised activities towards more complex, competitive sport and team game activities, there appears to be a correlative increase in the possibility of the exclusion of some pupils with SEN (Smith, 2004). Some PE teachers have suggested that they find it difficult to include some pupils with SEN, in team games or otherwise, because of their lack of inclusion training (Morley et al., 2005; Smith and Green, 2004). Hence, it is to an examination of ITT and CPD processes that this paper now turns.

### **Initial Teacher Training and Continual Professional Development.**

Despite claiming that ITT and programmes of CPD would provide teachers with practical and theoretical experience of SEN (DfES, 2004), much of the available research emphasises a perceived failure – expressed mainly by academics and PE teachers – of the British Government to equip PE teachers with the knowledge, skill, experience and confidence to fully include pupils with SEN in their lessons (Morley et al., 2005; Smith and Green, 2004; Vickerman, 2002, 2007). In a study conducted by Vickerman (2007) only 37 per cent of trainee teachers were given the opportunity to teach pupils with SEN during their ITT; direct experience of SEN would come, according to many training providers, in schools on an *ad hoc* basis. Few trainee teachers, moreover, were assessed in the practice of including pupils with SEN in PE, thus making it difficult to ascertain their readiness to support the individual needs of pupils with SEN (Vickerman, 2007).

Some of the teachers in research conducted by Smith and Green (2004) suggested that the training or, more accurately, the lack of training they received during their ITT and as part of CPD was one of, if not the most constraining



influence on their teaching. Without the knowledge or experience of cultivating inclusive practices and provision, some PE teachers felt that they were simply unable to include pupils with SEN in their lessons (Morley et al., 2005; Smith and Green, 2004), particularly if it was competitive sport or team game based. It is also noteworthy, in this regard, that 37 per cent of ITT providers in research undertaken by Vickerman (2007) suggested that none of their staff had any direct SEN experience or qualifications, a point which draw further attention to the potential inadequacy of teacher training programmes.

In light of available research, it is perhaps unsurprising that many PE teachers and academics have called for inclusion issues to become an integral part of the culture of teacher training (Morley et al., 2005; Robertson et al., 2000; Vickerman et al., 2003; Vickerman, 2007) as a way of enabling PE teachers to achieve the government's inclusion objectives. Against the background of what is perceived as the 'impoverished nature of special educational needs and inclusive education provision' (Robertson et al., 2000: 61), Vickerman (2002) has highlighted a need to establish a clear and consistent approach to inclusive PE practice and provision. At present, much of the limited research available suggests that the provision of teacher training is often ephemeral, superficial, inaccessible and inconsistently delivered (Vickerman, 2002). Much of the formal training that teachers do receive is reported to be largely orientated towards general inclusion issues, which are not always relevant in a PE context (Coates and Vickerman, 2008; Morley et al., 2005). When PE teachers do receive training that they perceive as being germane to their day-to-day practices, it tends to be delivered informally, on an ad hoc basis through discussion with PE colleagues (Morley et al., 2005; Vickerman, 2002).

In addition to this perceived inadequacy of teacher training processes, some teachers – albeit within a small body of research – have suggested that their learning support colleagues have constrained them, to varying degrees, in their endeavours to include pupils with SEN in PE. It is, therefore, expedient for this paper to turn to an examination of the relationships between PE teachers, SENCOs and LSAs.

**Special Educational Needs Coordinators and Learning Support Assistants.** One consequence of an increase in the number of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools has been that SENCOs are now much more a part of the culture of many mainstream schools. The SENCO has received much more academic attention recently in part because of their apparently central role in SEN policy and practice. There is a statutory obligation for schools to identify a specialist teacher to undertake the role of SENCO (DfES, 2001). A SENCO is an educational specialist, whose remit involves, inter alia, liaising

with and advising teachers, parents, senior management and external agencies in relation to inclusion issues for pupils with SEN. They are also charged with the task of staff inclusion training, managing LSAs, assessing pupils with SEN, and managing the records and statements of pupils with SEN (DfES, 2001). In short, one of the objectives of a SENCO is to enable PE teachers to include pupils with SEN in their lessons.

In much of the, albeit limited, research available, some PE teachers have suggested that their ability to include pupils with SEN has been constrained, to varying degrees, by the tendency of many SENCOs to neglect them in terms of information, support and resources, particularly when it comes to LSAs, prioritising English, maths and science (Audit Commission, 2002; Morley et al., 2005; Smith and Green, 2004). Many statements of SEN, for instance, relate to classroom-based subjects and do little to advise teachers vis-a-vis the physical capabilities of pupils. Thus, it is often up to PE teachers to judge the needs of these pupils and, in turn, endeavour to develop suitable provision when necessary. The existing whole-school identification and statementing process, therefore, may need to be revised and modified because of the different type and level of challenges that PE teachers must endeavour to overcome when compared to the teachers of other subjects. Many PE departments must also attempt to overcome financial constraints to include pupils with SEN. While much equipment designed to aid the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools (computer software packages and hearing aids, for example) can be purchased from the funds controlled and designated by the SENCO and utilised across most of the curriculum, much of the equipment required in PE is subject-specific; for example, larger, softer and/or brighter balls. The burden, thus, often falls on the PE department, which could potentially constrain the development of an inclusive PE culture.

The inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream PE has allegedly been compromised further, according to some teachers, by the tendency of LSAs to place varying degrees of constraint upon the everyday activities of PE teachers (Smith and Green, 2004). Many of the LSAs who work in mainstream schools are more classroom-based assistants and their lack of specialist PE training and experience has meant that some teachers consider LSAs 'more of a hindrance than a help' when it comes to the bearing their presence has on the effectiveness of their teaching (Smith and Green, 2004: 601). Some PE teachers and, for that matter, some pupils with SEN view the presence of LSAs in PE lessons as having a detrimental impact on the learning and social interaction of pupils with SEN (Fitzgerald et al, 2003a, 2003b; Smith and Green, 2004), which is particularly noteworthy given that many pupils with SEN consider the social element of PE as being one of the most important (Atkinson and Black, 2006). Therefore, despite



the fact that LSAs are employed as a conduit to the inclusion of pupils with SEN, one unintended consequence of their presence in PE is that they could do more to fortify, rather than breakdown, barrier between pupils with and without SEN.

Despite the many criticisms of LSAs from teachers, some of the PE teachers in research conducted by Smith and Green (2004) highlighted the pragmatic benefits of having LSAs in their lessons. Often, the LSAs allowed the teacher to 'get on with teaching the other pupils' (teacher; cited in Smith and Green, 2004: 601); that is, the teacher could assign an LSA to a pupil with SEN to give them one-to-one support, while the teacher taught the activity they had planned for the rest of the class. Similarly, MENCAP (1999) reported that many class teachers delegate responsibility for pupils with SEN to the LSAs and often have little interaction with the pupil, or involvement in planning and delivering differentiated work. Again, this isolation process can do more to reinforce barriers between pupils with and without SEN and, potentially, build barriers between PE teachers and pupils with SEN. It means, too, that on some occasions pupils with SEN are being taught by LSAs who are not qualified teachers, while pupils without SEN are taught by the teacher, which could potentially impact upon their academic attainment and, thus, their chance of going to university and/or gaining employment. If pupils with SEN do not go to university and/or gain employment once they leave school, they can be further stigmatised and potentially become dependent on social welfare. It is in light of the perceived inadequacy of the support systems that have been embedded in the culture of many schools that this paper aims, in particular, to further explore the relationship between PE teachers, SENCOs and LSAs.

## Methodology

**Participants.** The interviews aimed to examine the process of including pupils with SEN in mainstream secondary schools from the perspective of PE teachers. Four teachers were purposively selected (Silverman, 2006) on the basis that they, first, agreed to be interviewed; second, worked within a mainstream school within North-West England; and, third, had experience seeking to including pupils with SEN in mainstream PE. Those teachers selected for interview comprised two who were fairly new to the profession (had fewer than 3 years teaching experience) and two experienced teachers (had more than 10 years teaching experience). The selection was intentionally diverse to ensure that data were gathered from different career perspectives because teachers and ITT and CPD processes have changed considerably over the last 10 years (Morley et al., 2005); therefore, a comparison may add an interesting dimension to the research. Before proceeding to an exploration of the data gathering stage, it must be noted that small-scale studies such as this should not be generalised from a

single case to a larger population (Tenenbaum and Driscoll, 2005). However, the issues raised and data collected from this detailed study can add to the stock of reality-congruent knowledge and thus make a contribution to the greater debate of SEN and inclusive education.

**Data Gathering.** Traditionally, interviews are demarcated into four categories: structured, semi-structured, unstructured, and focus group. A semi-structured format was chosen because, although a predetermined list of questions can ensure that all areas pertinent to the research are covered, it is useful to have the flexibility to alter the sequence, order and wording of the questions, or develop new questions to probe for more information (Arksey and Knight, 1999). In short, a semi-structured interview format allows the researcher to identify and explore those serendipitous areas that have not been planned for as they emerge from the dynamic verbal interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. The validity of the interview questions was assessed through a mock interview. The questions were tested, feedback was given, and some questions were added, retracted and reworded to try to ensure that they would allow the researcher to elicit the information required. Open-ended questions were used to allow the interviewee to answer the question and express any additional information that they felt was relevant within the context of the discussions. The interviews typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were undertaken at the school in which the teachers worked. Only the interviewee and interviewer were present at all interviews and, perhaps fortunately, at no point did anyone enter the room, or disrupt the interview in anyway, which may have added to the reliability of the data. Indeed, interviewees may not divulge information, especially confidential information, if other people are present (Bryman, 2008).

**Data Analysis.** It is simply not possible to rely on human recall alone; therefore, an interview must be recorded in some way. The interviewer can either choose to record their interview via written or typed notes, audio-tape, or video camera (Gratton and Jones, 2004). For this study, an audio-cassette recorder was used once the teachers' permission had been secured. The taking of additional notes was decided against because it can impact upon the dynamics of the conversation and, thus, the rapport between the interviewee and interviewer. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the interviewee and the school in which they worked, and all data were stored in a secret, secure location to which only the researcher had access. NVIVO software was used to analyse the interview transcripts, from which the following key themes were identified: integration and inclusion, the NCPE, ITT and CPD, and SENCOs and LSAs. However, a caveat must be noted in this regard: NVIVO software can only take over the physical task of coding and grouping

information, thus leaving decisions about the coding of contextual materials and the interpretation of the findings to the researcher (Byman, 2008).

## Findings and Discussion

**Integration and Inclusion.** During the interviews, each teacher was asked what their understanding was of the terms integration and inclusion. In line with research conducted by Smith (2004) and Morley et al. (2005), all of the teachers, regardless of their teaching experience, found it difficult to differentiate between the two terms. One teacher acknowledged their confusion thus: ‘inclusion was a term I came across a lot [during ITT] but not something I could honestly say I understand. I mean, I know that inclusion means including everybody regardless but I also thought that was what integration means’ (teacher D, inexperienced). The concept of inclusion was, according to one teacher, often reiterated during meetings with senior managers (teacher B, inexperienced). So, despite the fact that inclusion is a term that teachers are familiar with, one that the more inexperienced teachers first came across during their ITT, and one that all teachers continue to hear on a weekly basis, many find it difficult to distinguish between the two terms and, perhaps, appreciate how such conceptual ambiguity can impact on their ability to include pupils with SEN in PE. For example, those teachers who – knowingly or otherwise – plan and deliver activities from an integration perspective would devise strategies that allow pupils with SEN to ‘fit in’ to the existing structure and arrangements of the NCPE, which has already been criticised for being, in its current form, largely inappropriate for pupils with SEN. On the other hand, teachers who plan and deliver activities from an inclusion perspective would aim to ensure that the activities are wholly inclusive from the outset; they would aim to ensure that they remove the barriers that many pupils with SEN face when trying to access the curriculum.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the inclusion ethos that has been identified as the most appropriate for including pupils with SEN fully and meaningfully in the NCPE (Smith, 2004; Morley et al., 2005; Vickerman, 2002) and, thus, has led to calls for it to be embedded in the philosophies of all PE teachers (Vickerman, 2002). Interestingly, Vickerman (2002) suggests that academics and policy-makers also use the terms integration and inclusion synonymously, while Dyson and Millward (2000) argue that much of the inclusion and diversity rhetoric, especially within an educational context, is confusing and inconsistent. Take, for example, *The National Curriculum Handbook for Secondary Teachers in England* (DfEE/QCA, 1999), which uses the terms integration, inclusion and mainstreaming interchangeably in one document. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that PE teachers find it difficult to differentiate between integration and inclusion when many of the other groups who are enmeshed in a teacher’s

relational network also encounter difficulty when trying to agree upon what inclusion actually entails. Hence, whilst there remains little consensus between education professionals, academics and policy-makers regarding the ambiguous concept of inclusion, its interpretation will continue to be determined by the PE teachers themselves, which will inform the ways in which they seek to include pupils with SEN and, in turn, may constrain the extent to which those pupils are provided meaningful experiences of PE (Morley et al., 2005; Smith, 2004).

**The National Curriculum Physical Education.** According to all the teachers, competitive sport and team games are a prevalent feature of the curriculum offered by their schools. Team games, specifically, were highlighted by all teachers as an activity area that they encountered particular difficulty including pupils with SEN. Teacher B (inexperienced) expressed concern relating to their ability to devise rules and strategies to fully include pupils with SEN: ‘some of the kids with learning disabilities and co-ordination problems find it hard to play in [team] games because they ... struggle with the skill level ... It is an area that I find difficult because I have to come up with rules and strategies to get them [pupils with SEN] involved. These comments appear to view the ‘problem’ as being the pupil; the pupil cannot participate in the lesson because their skill level is lower than their ostensibly more able peers, a point that is iterated by teacher A (experienced), and teacher D (inexperienced) in the following comments: ‘players of a lesser ability, including those with SEN, can become isolated [in team games] because they are not as good as some of the other players. So this can be difficult for me as a teacher. I have to adapt the game and impose rules to involve everybody’.

The findings of this study bear a close resemblance to research conducted by Smith (2004), Fitzgerald et al., (2003a) and Fitzgerald (2005), which suggests that team games exclude, by degrees, some pupils with SEN from being fully included in mainstream PE. There appears to be a contradiction between a PE curriculum dominated by team games and schools that are being constrained, by government policy, to promote an inclusive, whole-school environment (Maher, 2010). It was in light of this perceived contradiction that each teacher was asked why they thought team games were such an integral part of the PE programme in their school. According to teacher C (experienced): ‘staff usually have an interest in football for men... they [women] usually have an interest in netball and hockey. In this school, at least, it appears that it is the teachers who have the power to decide, to varying degrees, which activities are delivered. Subsequently, many are prioritising team games; a choice that is, in turn, constraining the extent to which teachers can include some pupils with SEN in PE. With evidence of the complexities inherent in including pupils with SEN in team games, the researcher asked the teachers if there were any activities they found easier to include pupils with SEN.

All the teachers, again, regardless of experience, suggested that individual activities such as dance, gymnastics, badminton, athletics and table tennis were easier to plan for and deliver in an inclusive way: 'I would say that dance and gymnastics are activities that may be easier to deliver because ... if someone is struggling with a sequence you can go to them and give them some individual feedback and this wouldn't involve holding up the whole class. Also, you can plan so everybody progresses at different speeds' (teacher D, inexperienced). Similarly, both teacher B (inexperienced) and C (experienced) suggested that individual activities allowed them to plan for pupils' individual needs and capabilities without it impacting upon the development and achievement of the rest of the class: 'if you're doing an individual lesson the kids with SEN do what they can with no consequence on anybody else' (teacher C, experienced). Here, the teachers appear to be prioritising those pupils without SEN, rather than those who require additional support to be included. The process wherein pupils focus on developing the skills necessary for performance in team games (a passing move in rugby, for example) was also identified as being particularly inclusive. Again, this was mainly because the teachers could parallel the learning, thus allowing pupils to progress at their own speed without their ostensibly inferior capabilities impacting upon the rest of the class. In short, it appears that PE lessons are more inclusive when teachers can tailor the activity to suit individual needs and have the time to provide extra support.

### **Initial Teacher Training and Continual Professional Development.**

In line with research conducted elsewhere (see, for example, Morley et al., 2005; Smith and Green, 2004) all of the teachers interviewed suggested that their ITT did not adequately equip them with the knowledge, skill, experience or confidence to include pupils with SEN in mainstream PE once they gained employment. Specifically, the two experienced teachers claimed that their ITT did not entail any inclusion training, whilst the two less experienced teachers claimed that the SEN training they had received was mainly theoretically-based in the form of university lectures but did, to a lesser extent, involve using modified equipment. Thus, although it does appear that ITT has become more inclusion-orientated over the past 10 years or so, the teachers in this study believe that it is still inadequate. Indeed, while an understanding of the theoretical issues involved in inclusive education may go some way to highlight some of the challenges that trainee teachers may encounter in a mainstream schools setting, it alone, perhaps, cannot prepare them for the wide variety of practical difficulties many pupils must endeavour to overcome in order to participate in PE.

Next, each teacher was asked how their ITT could have better prepared them to include pupils with SEN in PE. The main, recurring response was that practical experience, which involved teachers interacting with and teaching pupils with

SEN, would have been the most useful form of training. 'Practical experience would have been useful. It's ok talking about it [working with pupils with SEN] but when you do it, it's a big shock' (teacher B, inexperienced). Interestingly, teacher B (inexperienced) suggested that they believed that they were purposively prevented from teaching those classes that had pupils with SEN during their school placement. This point is particularly noteworthy given that many teachers have reported that practical experience played a pivotal role in their gaining confidence to work with pupils with SEN (LeRoy and Simpson, 1996; Morely et al., 2005; Rizzo and Vispoel, 1992). The above criticisms notwithstanding, it is perhaps unsurprising that many ITT programmes are not underpinned by a culture of inclusion given that ITT providers must address approximately an additional 60 standards in order to prepare trainee teachers for the work in their schools (Vickerman, 2007). It would appear, therefore, that ITT providers are finding it difficult to prioritise inclusion issues because they are constrained, by the government, to cover a varied and congested programme as a legal requirement.

Most of the teachers interviewed suggested that they rarely received any inclusion training as part of their CPD because, in short, 'most heads of departments are thinking if they do have an INSET [in-service training] day, they have got more important things to spend the day training on' (teacher C, experienced). Thus, it appears that some PE departments do not consider the inclusion of pupils with SEN as a priority issue despite the fact that one of the more experienced PE teachers appeared to advocate the SEN training they had undertaken as part of their role as a school sports co-ordinator (SSCo): 'before I had the [SEN] training I would have done them [pupils with SEN] an injustice because I wouldn't have known what to do with them. I would have taken the age-old route of, ok, go and stand in the corner, don't bother me. I think that still happens with staff who haven't had the training' (teacher C, experienced). In light of the perceived lack of training opportunities, each teacher was asked the form which inclusion training should take in their school. Again, the most popular view was for teachers to work practically in a special school with teachers and pupils. This form of training, however, may be unrealistic given the cost of teacher-cover. Another form of training, which is perhaps more viable, was offered by teacher C: 'have an inclusion expert come in [to the PE department] and show the staff how to adapt games in an inclusive way'. Taking this second approach would mean that all teachers received a consistent, standardised and contextualised form of training at a smaller cost.

**Special Educational Needs Coordinators and Learning Support Assistants.** Consistent with the findings of research conducted previously (see, for example, Audit Commission, 2002; Morley et al., 2005; Smith and Green, 2004) some of the teachers in this study suggested that their ability to include



pupils with SEN in PE has been constrained, to varying degrees, by SENCOs. In particular, there is a perception that SENCOs are prioritising other subjects: 'I think the school prioritises, and maybe quite rightly so, the literacy and numeracy strategy ... I don't think that enough is put in place to support PE and, rightly or wrongly, it might be to do with money, it might be to do with staff availability, but the SENCO's contribution to PE has been non-existent (teacher D, inexperienced). As a result, teacher D (inexperienced) and, for that matter, teacher C (experienced) suggested that the onus was often on the PE department – some of whom, it must be remembered, have suggested that they have received little inclusion training – to develop and implement strategies and provision that endeavour to facilitate the inclusion of pupils with SEN in PE. So, much the same as research undertaken by Morley et al. (2004) and Smith and Green (2004) it appears that some SENCOs are using their power chances, which they enjoy because they are able to control, to varying degrees, SEN information and resources to further the government's objectives for English and maths. In turn, some PE teachers feel constrained and unable to deliver the government's inclusion objectives because of the lack of support they receive from SENCOs when planning and implementing their curriculum. These findings are perhaps unsurprising given policy concerns regarding the availability of specialist expertise and resources to support inclusion in mainstream schools (DfES, 2001).

Similar to research conducted by Smith and Green (2004), many of the teachers interviewed for this study were critical of the fact that the LSAs in their schools lacked PE-specific training, knowledge and expertise. 'I don't think the learning support assistants are trained adequately. We don't give them any training, on the job. They might go away and do some health and safety stuff, or first aid training, but they're not given any PE-specific training on how to deal with issues in the lesson' (teacher C, experienced). These concerns were echoed in comments made by teacher D (inexperienced): 'I don't think they are trained; they are more there for the pupil. In terms of delivery of the lesson, they wouldn't have any input or anything ... they just let the class teacher get on with it really. I think that maybe it would be better if they had specific training in PE'. All the teachers, in fact, thought that they would be more able to include pupils with SEN in PE if LSAs undertook PE-specific training. One teacher, however, doubted whether this would happen because they suggested that SENCOs and LSAs were 'more concerned with maths and English rather than PE' (teacher B, inexperienced). Here, again, it appears that the SENCO – who, it must be noted, is charged by the government with the task of training and managing LSAs – is using their power to constrain the extent to which teachers can include pupils with SEN in PE by prioritising classroom-based subjects such as English and maths. This is despite the fact that National Occupational Standards were developed and a range of professional qualifications – from NVQs to foundation degrees –

have emerged (LSC, 2004) to ensure that LSAs are adequately prepared for their role. It would be misleading, however, to contend that SENCOs are prioritising classroom based subjects because of their own ideologies alone; rather, many are constrained by senior management – who are, in turn, constrained by the government – to prioritise core subject such as English, maths and science in order to improve school standards.

One teacher highlighted a process whereby the LSAs would ‘come along and deposit their particular child in the PE department, then it is up to the PE department to help support the child. They [the LSA] then go away and come back at the end of the lesson’ (teacher A, experienced). Teacher A, perhaps unsurprisingly, was critical of this process inasmuch as they suggested that it would be a lot more beneficial if the LSAs supported and guided the pupils with SEN throughout the PE lesson, much the same as they did in English and maths. Again, it appears that LSAs are being prioritised to classroom-based subjects which, potentially, could have a detrimental impact upon the extent to which PE teacher can include pupils with SEN. Nevertheless, criticisms of LSAs aside, one teacher highlighted the pragmatic benefits of LSAs by describing some of them as an ‘invaluable asset’ (teacher D, inexperienced), both for the contribution they made to PE lessons and the whole-school environment. In particular, teacher D praised those LSAs who had an interest and knowledge of ‘sport’ – interestingly, not PE – because they are able to ‘give that little bit of extra support’. It could be argued, therefore, that when LSAs have some PE-specific knowledge, are involved in the planning of the lesson and have a good relationship with the teacher, they can enable PE teachers to include pupils with SEN.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this paper suggest that team games are activities which teachers find particular difficulty to plan and deliver in an inclusive way. Specifically, many teachers suggested that there was limited opportunity for individual planning during team games and that they found it difficult to develop and implement rules and adapt games to make them more inclusive. On the other hand, individual activities such as dance, gymnastics, tennis, badminton and athletics were highlighted as activities that are easier to plan and deliver in an inclusive way. In particular, the teachers suggested that through these activities they could plan for and support each individual on a one-to-one basis without it impacting upon the development and achievement of the rest of the class. It is recommend, therefore, that teachers may need to plan and deliver a more balanced curriculum, which places more emphasis on individual activities. When team games are planned for and delivered, and there is no viable reason why they should not or cannot be, it is important to start from the premise of full

inclusion. If that is not possible, teachers should be able to adapt and modify the activity in an inclusive way.

Overall, there was an expressed feeling among the teachers interviewed that, first, their ITT had not prepared them adequately for their day-to-day endeavours to include pupils with SEN in PE; and, second, that the schools in which they work are not providing them with any PE-specific inclusion training. In light of these concerns, it is recommended that ITT processes are revamped to include more hours dedicated to practically-based training, where teachers work in a special school alongside inclusion experts, teaching pupils who experience a wide range of difficulties. Similarly, this approach could be used for programmes of CPD. However, if this is not logistically viable, schools could invite inclusion experts (from the English Federation of Disability Sport or Youth Sport Trust, for example) to deliver PE-specific, departmental training. Alternatively, heads of PE can undertake inclusion training, which would allow them to deliver 'in house' training to PE colleagues. The British Government, in turn, could introduce an accreditation system for which schools must provide plans and, subsequently, evidence to show they are committed to an inclusive school environment.

Finally, there was a general feeling among PE teachers that they were not receiving enough, if any, support from SENCOs whose role is, lest we forget, to enable teachers to include pupils with SEN. Instead, it appears that SENCOs are prioritising SEN resources, particularly in the form of LSAs, to classroom-based subject such as English and maths. Moreover, some PE teachers believe that LSAs are placing varying degrees of constraint upon their ability to include pupils with SEN in PE, mainly because of their lack of PE-specific knowledge and experience. Thus, it is recommended that SENCOs ensure that training opportunities are available to LSAs, which allow them become familiar with the PE curriculum and inclusive practises within a PE context. Although it is duly acknowledged that these recommendations are not a panacea to all of the problems that teachers encounter when seeking to include pupils with SEN in mainstream PE, it is argued that they will go some way to help PE teachers overcome some of the constraints placed on their day-to-day-activities, thus potentially providing more meaningful experiences of PE for pupils with SEN.

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